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Pandemic

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PANDEMIC

Kenny reached in for the damper handle and brought down flakes of rust—water signs. The fireplace leaked in the rare Southern California rain. They never used it, but Kenny worked to keep it out of his mind. Home repair was an addiction—the desire to fortify what one owned; build on it; preempt its wear. He used a baseball bat to shove a wadded towel up the flue. Since he was sealing the fireplace in plastic, he didn't think the towel was necessary, but Nicole wanted it.

"Do you remember that old PSA," he asked her. "Where a home gets too insulated and builds up radon?"

Nicole was tired, having sealed two casement windows with duct tape. She peeled off tape until her fingers gave out.

"I never heard of radon around here."

"But are we in danger; you know, in the same way children suffocate if they put a plastic bag over their head?"

She kept an anger beamed at the tape roll. "It's what they said to do."

He had the compulsion to throw his family in the car and race out of town, but when he thought of his job, it paralyzed him. He halfway expected to get rehired and Nicole seemed to be carrying on as if he would. Nothing had changed for her. Ever since she pulled their son, Jacek, out of the Waldorf School to become his teacher, the two of them rarely left the house.

Something alive rustled the river rock outside the window. She stopped taping and the house was silent except for the distant beeps of Jacek's game.

"A dog," whispered Kenny, moving carefully on the creaky floor. He parted the Roman blind no wider than an eyeball's pupil to find the back of a looming, gray head trying to see in from the opposite edge. The closeness startled. He mouthed the name,

"Gerber."

Fred Gerber—hermit neighbor.

She shook her head violently. Kenny didn't like the idea of hiding in his own living room, especially since Gerber looked healthy. It was a cause for celebration. Seventy-seven, living at an accustomed level of filth, Gerber was driven by a secret dynamo. Footsteps clapped on the porch and the door cracked with adult weight leaning in. She whispered, "Can he see through the door? I smell him."

Kenny shook his head, "If we ask him, he'll go."

"No. He'll never stop talking. It's dangerous."

When footsteps receded, Nicole peeked out and watched Gerber head back to his paint-chipped house, surrounded by stacks of white, five-gallon buckets. His immaculate El Camino stood out, sparkling olive with shining hubcaps. El Caminos were a cultish item in Eagle Rock.

"He's healthy enough to wash that truck."

"It's an El Camino," Kenny corrected.

She moved to the door and clawed at the roll. "I hate this tape." Her scream wiped away the quiet.

Jacek stomped in, pear-shaped body shaking like Jell-O. "Why are you yelling?" In public school, he would have been a sixth grader, naively telling bullies his name was taken from a Polish grandfather. Bulging from under one of his tighter Gap T-shirts, his chest suggested a pubescent girl, and his fine, shoulder-length, blond hair was identical to his mom's.

Nicole looked up, flustered, recalling the vows of home schooling. "Yes, why am I yelling? That's a good question. Shouting makes me feel better but everyone else has to suffer my complaints, don't they?"

"We're a little tired from the rationing," his father said.

food issues:

They considered the lentil soup, but chose minestrone. Food was a daily topic and Kenny was sick of it. Nicole was sick of it, but couldn't help herself. She waved a match over the burner until a medieval blue ring whooshed in a circle, vanishing dread. They had no idea how the gas came. Kenny peeked around the side of the sunshade on the kitchen window. A squirrel moved across the garage roof, but no sign of Gerber. A year ago while they were vacationing, he rolled their trash bins behind the house. No one asked him to. He kept an eye on the street and would likely shuffle down their drive at some point and make note of Kenny's generator vent. Or he might withdraw for weeks. To couples old enough to have lost a parent, there was no mystery how Gerber lived: widowed, childless, without family—only Joe, his scavenging partner across the street. The can of lentil soup sat alone on the floor. Kenny took a marker from the mug of pens by the dead phone and squatted on his left leg. The right one hurt if he sat on it, having ruined his calf muscle painting the garage. The can was labeled "1." He crossed it out.

"I guess we can add lentils to the last day, when we'll really need something extra."

In the corner of the kitchen was an ungainly stack of cans and boxes. It looked like something Gerber hoarded. They had eaten carelessly for a week before buckling down and rationing. The cans were numbered with a Sharpie from 3 to 44. Sandwich bags full of rice, nuts, crackers, raisins, and scoops of oatmeal were taped to the cans and jars. Boxes of mac & cheese had an index card with a day number and serving sizes.

Peaches and powdered milk were to start Day 1, a way of weaning Jacek off cereal. He previously liked peaches, but complained and asked for the next day's ration of Honey Nut

Cheerios, quite possibly the last box of cereal in Eagle Rock, purchased from Won Liquors. Nicole believed a child had the right to choose meals. The best she could do was set an example. The peaches were pushed ahead with hope that a good night's sleep might change his mind. She and Kenny were also denied a share of peaches, since they couldn't open the can and save some for Jacek without a working refrigerator.

At the evening meal, Jacek had complained and they handed over the last of the Cheerios, pulled from Day 4. Worried and with little appetite, Kenny and Nicole decided to save the lentil soup. There wasn't even a remote chance Jacek would eat a lentil.

When Day 2 came, before they could eat the canned pears, Kenny and Nicole waited for Jacek to wake up, since he went to bed well past midnight and slept until noon. They had a plan for the pears. Jacek said pears made him gag but they thought the pears might make the peaches look attractive.

There were gunshots and a swaggering muffler belched down La Roda Street. Kenny peeked around the shade.

"Gerber's window's shot."

"A drive-by?" The phrase seemed out-of-place, but accurate.

"I bet it's something to do with that El Camino. He's had offers, but he'll never sell."

"Those fucking El Caminos," Nicole said softly.

She checked Jacek. He was still asleep. At midday, he got up and drank chocolate powdered milk (a blessing, he accepted milk made from tap water). It fortified him for game play. After a battery change in the afternoon, Jacek's hunger came on full-force, but he wanted the mac & cheese rationed for dinner. That gave his parents the go ahead on pears, including Jacek's share, which they devoured like hyenas.

As light fell on Day 2, the effect on the casement windows gave Kenny an empty sense that the day was lost and anything hopeful would have to start tomorrow.

"Minestrone soup," Nicole pitched her voice toward Jacek's room.

"He's full on mac," Kenny said, but headed there anyway. He saw Jay's back against the bed, his stomach and knees forming a shelf holding the game console. The air was moist with dirty clothes; a sea of prickly game figurines threatened bare feet. Gerber's house came to mind, filled with other people's junk, perhaps some of it plucked from Kenny's own trash bin.

Nicole had instructed him not to criticize Jacek's room. Having studied the ways of Delight-Driven Learning, Nicole believed she alone possessed a formula for guidance. Kenny would have to wait until their private time in bed to learn more, since Jacek stayed up so late.

"How 'bout some delicious minestrone?" he asked his son. "It's got pasta shells."

When Kenny pulled the sheet over him, his stomach rumbling, he realized the sound was not muted as Nicole had asked and he was tracing Jay's mind in game play, decision speed and fluency marked by whirrs of navigation. Soldier voices cried for help; others offered Jay congratulations: "Good shooting, mister."

"I don't like him up all night," he said when Nicole crawled in. "It would be easier if he ate with us."

"I know. I think one idea is to sleep on his schedule."

"I can't. I have to be up in case the National Guard comes by. That's how they might distribute vaccines if everything's still down."

She lowered her voice. "It's crazy, cut off like this. I can't

blog or talk to Jennifer. I know she had a sleep problem with Zeke, but I don't remember what she did. I'm thinking I could set the alarm at 'two' and get up and suggest he come to bed."

"Can I clean his room? How do you make cleaning a room delightful?"

"The delight-driven way is to suggest; show excitement about his choices. Now when that doesn't work—and sometimes it's important for health, like brushing teeth—you still can't force a child, but you can withhold approval. Remember when I wouldn't look him in the face until he brushed because I said it was yucky? That only took a few days."

"Is he brushing? His breath seems foul."

"He says he is but we're asleep, so that's another reason for me to get up at two. I can casually smell his breath. Let me figure out a reward."

Kenny was only too happy to. His chest felt as if a horse was standing on it. Most of their friends had abandoned the city, but he and Nicole thought the quarantine was safer. The problem was trying to think with a car alarm going off. If Jay got the sickness and died, would Nicole want to live? Kenny pushed his hands like a paddle; water flowed in currents between the fingers. He clawed at the surface, reaching for air and light, trying to get away from that alarm and awful dread. In a moment as pure as oxygen, he had the kind of pointed, intense revelation only found in nightmares: he didn't like his son.

Kenny was clutching a battery-powered Braun clock that read 2:10. Nicole had hit the snooze button. He found her and Jacek in the kitchen, illuminated by stabs of lantern light. She was cooking mac & cheese.

"Jacek's stomach hurts."

"I think I have the sickness, Dad. My eyes are burning."

"It's called eyestrain, Jay."

Nicole poured noodles in the pot, carefully, but the boiling water splashed her hand.

"You had the sickness, didn't you, Mom?"

"I had regular flu."

"We don't know what your mom had. It could have been a mild case of sickness."

"I think I have a mild case."

"Do you feel like eating?"

"I'm starving."

"Then you don't have nodding disease." This was a tiresome routine but Kenny thought it might be the beginning of Jay's adult understanding of death.

Kenny shined his precious Maglite on the mac & cheese and then remembered his own rule not to waste batteries if another light burned.

"This mac is for Day 5. What are you going to eat on Day 5?"

"Dad, I can see the mac & cheese sitting there. If you don't want me to obsess over it, you should hide it like Santa Claus—until Christmas." He referred to Santa in a way that made Kenny wonder if Nicole had told him. The rationing was falling apart. There was no handyman he could call to fix it.

Jacek counted aloud, "One, two, three..." pointing out the mac & cheese appearing every fourth day in the stacks. "Thirteen boxes. I could eat one a day. That's almost two weeks. See, just because I'm in Fun-School doesn't mean I can't count."

"I never said that." Kenny raised his voice louder than he meant to. "I know you can count, but we rationed for forty-four days."

"You told Mom I couldn't be a scientist, because I can't count."

"You can count whenever you want," Nicole said. "If you

want to be a scientist, you'll learn math when you want it. Then you'll learn it faster because it's fun." She was rubbing her eyes.

"Ken, this is a learning moment. He's discovering math."

bathing:

At noon, alone in the living room, Kenny was trying to remember what day it was. Nicole hadn't stirred when he left the bed. That meant she took Ambien.

Shower day. They took showers every three days. Kenny enjoyed them with a pleasure equal to Jacek's dislike—another way his son resembled Gerber.

He worked out a schedule for the generator. A fleeing neighbor loaned it to power Kenny's electric water heater, which he unfortunately upgraded from natural gas before the crisis. With the Shell and 76 stations shut down, Kenny scrambled to find nine gallons of gasoline, siphoning most of it from one of their two cars.

His public school math told him they had twenty-five minutes of hot water, every third day until the food ran out. The priority was their bodies. Cookware received a sink of hot water in the kitchen, and the last part was to fill the tub for laundry before shutting off the generator, timed to the Braun.

A fifteen-amp cord snaked up the basement, feeding a power strip that serviced the TV, computer, and battery charger. Kenny unscrewed the Maglite, but he could tell it was empty. Jacek took the batteries for his game, and there was usually no working Maglite the night before shower day.

He peeked out at Gerber's. The last car heard was the shooter's. His foot poked at the plastic sheet around the fireplace and he noticed old, black water stains on the floor. He tried not to worry but the less he understood, the more it cost. Chimneys

were specialized. The house also needed a new roof and the connection to the chimney, the flashing, might be the source of the leak. That's how it went. One repair spread to the next like a virus. He heard game sounds.

"Shower day," he said when Jay came out for milk.

"Recharge day," Jay insisted. "My batteries are weak and sucking."

"Were you guys up late?"

"I don't know. Mom was on the couch and I woke her and told her my idea. Listen. If I was an angel and had huge wings, how would I go to bed? Would I have to sleep on my stomach or could I fold the wings around me like a blanket?"

Kenny remembered going to bed alone. "Are you talking about a videogame?"

"No, it's an idea I invented: If I was an angel. Mom said it was very original." His fingers jabbed the game buttons. "These Mag batteries are shit."

Kenny had the urge to reprimand him, but there was no cable TV to blame since the grid was shut down. He and Nicole cursed a lot during the first stage of the pandemic.

Kenny lifted the grill from the hall floor. It was intake for central air, but he had dismantled the ductwork and used the hole to reach the basement. Otherwise the only entrance was from the backyard. Sitting at the edge, resting his feet on a stepladder, the cool air hit his cheeks.

After filling the reservoir, he returned the gas container to a safe nook by Jay's old tricycle and a shelf of 1993 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. On the second pull of the cord the basement came to life. Anybody on the block would hear the generator, perhaps a mile away in the hills. He climbed out and put a blanket on top of the grill to muffle sound, pressed down with a couple *Britannicas*.

The shower sprayed warm and strong. He recalled the first day home, cut loose from his job, and wanted to bring back that feeling, the joy of family vacation. It didn't make sense during a crisis but they all had it.

"I'm out, I'm out." Nicole was ready to take his place. He checked the clock and walked briskly to Jay on the couch, picking his big toe. "Jay, eleven minutes. Let's do it." Jay moaned and hugged his robe around him like the angel he invented.

"Shower day. Let's do it."

His voice broke. "I don't need a shower, I haven't sweated." Kenny took hold of a wing.

"Ouch, you're hurting me." All Kenny could think: he should have showered last, making Nicole handle him. He realized she was deaf in the bathroom.

"If you don't get in the shower I will accidentally step on your game console."

Jay bore teeth and left. Another three days and they would do this again. He powered the TV while drying himself, flipping across blinks of white noise—no images at all, he supposed, were better than ones of African peasants streaming out of plague-ridden villages, viewed from helicopters.

Nicole raised her face to the warm jets, luxuriating. "Jacek, get in." She rinsed off soap while he stood with one foot on top of the other.

"Hey, what about your hair," he chided.

"I don't need to wash it every time," she pointed out.

He shook off the robe and stumbled through the curtain as she turned to face him, partly blocking the spray. The water seemed to emanate from her physique. "Did you know it's exactly two months till Smile at Life?"

"I'm freezing, let me in the hot." Their wet hips and arms slid past each other as they traded spaces. She noticed threads of

black hair sprouting above his crotch.

"How can we go?" he said. "We can't leave the house."

"We'll be out by then," she said, squeezing shampoo over his hair. "We have to. The food'll be gone."

"I don't want to wash my hair either."

"Please? It's really oily. I can shine it up." A dramatic sigh indicated approval. "Even if the electric is out, some people will get to the conference; maybe not everybody. It's a two hour drive."

Kenny poked in. "Five minutes."

"Mom, do you think anybody died, of the Fun-Schoolers?"

"Well." She considered it. "Of about twenty people in our group, it's possible. I just know whoever is healthy will get to Smile at Life."

the nodding sign:

Nicole had one leg over the arm of an Ikea chair, reading *Britannica Vol. Twelve*. "Dehydration can be controlled with fluid therapy and headaches with aspirin—can you believe this shit? That's all they have about flu. I can't believe I wrote school reports from these books."

Kenny was studying the more general macropaedia. "There's a full page about viral categories—nothing practical. I'm beginning to see how monks learned, hand-copying the same books over and over."

She was in the next volume. "They don't have Marburg disease."

"Mom, I got a new level." Jacek was wrapped in a blanket on the couch. "I just killed about a hundred people."

"Somebody compared it to Marburg," Kenny said. "But

Marburg might have happened after 'ninety-three. I don't know. Dad got these *Britannica* when he retired in 'ninety-three."

Jacek coughed from the chest. "Uh-oh, sounds like Marburg."

Nicole got up and put her hand flat to his forehead. He moaned and shook his body hard enough to make the sound undulate, clearly enjoying himself. "Stop it," she said.

"I'm not doing anything."

"Yes, you are. You're acting like you have the nodding sign and you're hurting our feelings." Jacek had reacted to the news clips as many American children had—semi-naked African boys and girls nodding their heads looked strange, even funny. Nicole had explained that the children were in a trance.

Worried, she skipped her bathroom chores that night.

"He's sweating, Kenny." Jacek's bedroom was humid, the door always shut once Jay was in bed, Nicole wedging a towel underneath. It reminded Kenny of his pot-smoking days in high school.

The next morning, something hot on his chest woke him. It was his burning hands. Kenny had the same crushing panic when they laid him off work, and Nicole realized he was sick the moment she saw his face.

"Oh my god. I'm giving you all the fruit Jacek won't eat," she said.

"He won't eat *any* fruit," Kenny said, suddenly accepting his freedom, his household duties at an end. There was nothing left but to wait for the ferryman and proceed across the River Styx.

Nicole washed her nightclothes in Epsom salts and boiled water on the stove and moved into Jacek's room on a pallet. He hopped in with her as if it was a Smile at Life sleepover.

She dug out a soup pot to use for a toilet. Kenny's thinking was impaired, but he was able to convince her it was more sanitary to use the bathroom and clean up while he was able than to empty a contaminated bucket. "It's Middle Ages," he said. "You start playing with chamber pots—," and he fell asleep.

She found the lid and he compromised: use the pot for urinating. Empty with potholders to keep hands clean. Wipe down the toilet. She cleaned again if Jacek wanted to pee, pacing outside the bathroom, heckling her to hurry.

As his temperature climbed, Nicole spoke through the door in muffled tones, relaying that Jay missed him. Night and day merged and the generator's whine filled his head at all hours. One morning he saw "get well" and "best dad in the world" on the panels of a crude paper box pieced together with Scotch tape on the nightstand. He gradually realized Jay had colored the fat letters outside the lines like someone who had never used a crayon. Kenny once read about Special Needs on a website and suggested to Nicole that Jay might have Asperger's Syndrome. She explained to Kenny that gifted was also a Special Need.

After Jacek depleted the mac and cheese, he beat his stomach as if it was a giant leech and howled. Nicole suggested he tear pages from the Britannica one at a time to calm himself. Days later, there was a pile of pages and empty covers.

"Kenny, we have to talk." She pounded the door until he opened his eyes and knocked over his lamp. Something had changed. She was saying goodbye.

"Do you think your body's giving up?" she said.

He labored, "Yes."

"When you die, I have to move you. It's unsanitary." She was quiet for a long moment. "I can help you to the basement if you can walk. When the time comes, I'll drag you in the storage room."

Kenny tried to raise his leg. "I can't." The conversation seemed to resume later in the day.

"Listen, if you can stand for a second, I'll push the bed close to the window." The heat from that side was already unbearable. "Then I can push you out to the neighbor's yard. They're gone and I don't think they're coming back."

Tears rolled down his face. She was crying on the other side.

In his fever, he waded across a flooded floor, his parent's old tract home or one he'd visited on a Sunday "open house," snaking his shoulders through a constricted passage, sometimes opening to a palatial estate.

The sound of rain filled the room. His head ached to raise it. The pot was too heavy to move. He pushed through the plastic curtains over the door and came to the living room. It was bright, but not as hot in the main rooms. Jay was on the couch, squealing at the sight of him.

"You've got to put bowls under the fireplace, Jay. To catch leaks." Jay held his blanket in front like a student matador.

"Dad, you're killing us. You're killing us." Nicole's head appeared from a hole in the floor. Kenny pleaded with her to get the stainless steel mixing bowls.

"It's not raining," she shouted. "I'm running the generator for Jacek's batteries. They don't hold charge, Kenny. I'm sorry." He didn't understand why her head was disembodied.

She raised her arms and herded him back to the room. "Jacek has to keep playing if he wants to be a game designer someday."

The bed caught him, swallowing his face in pillow. It was so soft he fell asleep at once without strength to make a channel for air, an infant smothered by the weight of his head; all but lost, save for the involuntary flexing of his body. It had a will of its

own.

Some time later, he was bruised on the floor. Nicole had left a tray and he managed to sit against the wall, sucking the straw—*apricot* it said on the can. He never cared for apricot, he realized, as he drew it in. As the walls wavered, contractions and releases of muscle made his head move slightly back and forth. His jaw slackened and his mouth hung open as in autopsy, eyes dilating without sight. Rhythmic thumping sent sloshes of blood to the edges of his skull, to an endless horizon. Apricot juice and saliva rolled off his chin in undulating tides extending for miles, each drop to the puddle on the floor as big as an El Camino.

the neighborhood:

When self-awareness came back, Kenny pondered that it was the essence of humanity. Unfamiliar food or drink induced the nodding sign. It was discovered early on; new foods were a catalyst for the nodding sign, which took the form of a seizure, often followed by cardiac arrest. But you had to be infected with nodding disease first. The TV reported rumors by the end. Survival rates were a guesstimate; everything was. He felt drained and beat up, but something good was happening. He loved the neighborhood in summertime and wanted to see it. A hopeful excitement shot through him.

Leaning, pulling the door aside, he staggered smack into a web, momentarily held by a translucent wall. His mind sparked—took the sharp edge of the pot lid and cut the plastic like butter. He was also barricaded by the old loveseat. Nicole had stood it on end, blocking his exit. Jay slept on it only a year ago, situated at the foot of their bed. He spent his first eleven years nestled between them—attachment parenting—until Kenny said enough already. They were a warm family in winter, sharing the same cov-

ers until Jay finally migrated down to their feet on the loveseat like a Saint Bernard. Kenny had little strength in his arms, but he squeezed past.

His scratchy voice and lyrics from his youth about "flying like an eagle" drew Jay into the bathroom.

"Dad, you're showering without the generator," he said.

"Cold shower," he answered.

From the living room, Nicole thought she was hallucinating. Kenny lapped up a bowl of lentils like a dog. He had badgered Jay every step of the way to open them, his first use of a can opener, and he excelled.

The males wanted out. She asked if Kenny could live for awhile at the neighbor's next-door and see what food they abandoned and bring it to the porch until she was sure he wasn't contagious. He responded by ripping tape off the backdoor. Fifteen pounds lighter, he threaded a belt through the loops in his shorts. Jay followed him to the back deck holding a handkerchief over his nose.

The patio glare was vicious. Jay watched him limp down the steps.

"I don't want to leave Mom," he cried out and Kenny waved.

He walked around the house up the slope of the drive, the Santa Anas stirring the air. La Roda was silent as Sunday morning. He could walk the boulevard if he had the strength, two miles to the Pasadena Bridge and across the Arroyo Seco.

Gerber's gait caught his eye. He rounded the corner of his house bouncing like a giant rabbit with an armful of white buckets. Dizziness came and Jay startled him climbing the drive, huffing through his handkerchief, and they walked side by side, his son taller, not hunched over a game. He pictured Jay swinging a bat and running bases.

They reached Chickasaw Drive and the silence continued. The drone of traffic was absent.

"Dad, it stinks." He revealed his face, but covered it when the full force of putrefaction hit, walking past the first story garage of an apartment full of cars. They came to a cherry red, plastic Vons cart. Abandoned carts had always incensed him. They were like the worn parts of his house, demanding attention.

Colorado Boulevard was a Grand Canyon of vacancy. It resembled library photos of Eagle Rock in the time of cable cars. His throat hurt and he wondered why they'd lived to see it, resisting the notion his family was blessed.

Taco Bell was carved into a space between the old, commercial two-stories. A hand-made sign read: "We're open! No chicken." Something moved behind the glass.

"Dad, I want three tacos, no lettuce or tomatoes."

An older teen came to the window. Over the years, Kenny had dealt with somnambulant, minimum wage cashiers dragging out words and offering incorrect change, but this boy was raving.

"I opened yesterday and had three customers. People told their friends and today a carload almost cleaned me out."

"Are you the only employee?"

"Yeah. The manager died. I got plenty of beans. They're in a mix you heat with water. I was training for assistant manager and the owner died too, so this isn't exactly a regular Bell. I set my own prices. The owner was sick but willed me his store because his family died. I got it on paper." He produced a handwritten note. Kenny felt a stirring of admiration, guessing by ethnicity that the boy was public-schooled.

"How much is a beef burrito?"

"Nine dollars," the teen said. "I have to get things at Vons."

"Vons is open?" He turned to Jay, relieved.

"In the parking lot. It's a flea market on Saturday. That's why the burrito is nine. If you want a super, it's thirteen. It's the best I can do. Prices are going crazy and people are trading alcohol."

The boy was charging thirty-nine dollars for three super beef burritos, but money might already be worthless. He wanted to say it, but something stopped him. The boy was clever. He could take care of himself.

Jay ate as they walked, moaning and gulping, but Kenny was too shocked. A world without money could not expect mortgage payments. Jay laughed out a clump of food. "I never tasted a burrito this good in my entire life."

Nicole was sitting in the front lawn, weeping in a tearless way. The grass was barely hanging on without the automatic sprinkler. They were away too long and Kenny knew it. He offered her a burrito.

"Since when do they use aluminum foil?"

"Mom, these're good. It tastes different because the guy had to get different cheese than Taco Bell uses. Ingredients are supposed to be delivered from a central warehouse. That's why all the restaurants taste the same."

Kenny explained the new ownership while she flung open the burrito and massaged hot sauce out of a packet. "He got a lesson in franchises." Kenny was proud of his part. By the time Nicole took a bite, Jay had finished and asked his dad for the rest of his. The sudden intake of food had made Kenny light-headed and he readily handed it over. He was weak but happy to stand in the breeze with his family eating.

In the garage, he found the swing blade that the previous owner had left. Arms trembling, he managed to chop a few weeds along the patio until the sickness hit. He sprinted to the toilet downstairs. From the floor above were cries too terrifying to con-

nect with his own pain. The enemy clinched his gut every step up the back stairs.

The house was an oven. Jay was screaming in his room and Nicole shouted, her voice coaching from the bathroom. "Come in here and vomit."

"Fuck vomiting," Jay shouted. That word. It stung Kenny in his misery. He locked onto Nicole's face, reflected in the toilet water as the flush settled. "You trusted a kid. We ate dirty meat or lettuce."

Jay was heaving from his bed, holding a coyote stance on all fours. "I hope that kid gets nodding sign," he screamed.

a trip to the local market:

Kenny and Gerber broke down the door across the street and found Joe on his couch, hands gripping a Diet Dr. Pepper in rigor mortis. There was no mac and cheese in the kitchen or any other item on Jay's short list.

Saturday, Kenny decided to walk. He wanted to save gas and had to admit the abandoned cart was on his mind.

"Are you so old you forgot how to work a simple analog device?" Jay said to his father, reviewing the walkie-talkie operation. They hadn't used them since his first year at Waldorf. It seemed to Kenny a long enough time to forget, but Jay's world was too circumscribed to forget anything. There wasn't any space taken up with worry.

The sidewalk radiated. He came to the cart and wrapped his hands over the handle, pushing and slowing under the occasional awning. Six hundred dollars were in his pocket, five in hundred dollar bills, but he wondered if they had value. The spots of shade were hard to leave. He untied his shoes and slipped the hundreds in.

At Taco Bell, he decided to complain. Kenny rolled the cart past the fallen sign in the parking lot to the drive-thru window and saw the boy lying next to stacked cases of hydrogenated beans. His chest and head were speckled with bullet holes, his face chalky white.

The smell came.

He raced the cart over gaps between the parking lot and boulevard to get away from that bean and death smell. He couldn't tell Jay, not on a walkie, and was suddenly pleased they took him out of the Waldorf. Schools were finished now.

He pushed the cart in the middle lane by the median. The bakery, Tritch Hardware, and Casa Bianca Pizza were closed. The donut shop windows were destroyed. He wasn't aware of the heat, his life on fire.

"Hello, Jay." He released the button.

After several seconds, "Yeah." Jay was drowsy and the signal was weak on four double-'A's.

"Testing. Do I sound good? Over."

"Your batteries suck."

Kenny was nostalgic about last month, pleasantly sliding into a pair of loose jeans. He heard an engine far away.

"Dad, I thought of another cereal."

"I can barely hear you."

"I told you Honey Nut Cheerios or Frosted Flakes." The voice crackled. "I want to add Lucky Charms. I can live with any of those." The batteries were fading in the heat. "Did you get that, Dad?" The words became barks of static, like game samples but they originated from his flesh and blood. Jay was probably cursing.

It came over the horizon at ungodly speed, a griffin or dragon from Greek mythology—the Hummer, largest SUV made, this one long as a limousine.

He abandoned the cart and crossed the boulevard, limping close to the houses one lawn at a time. The vehicle passed without incident and Kenny headed toward Hill Drive, north of Colorado, where homes grew tall and roads widened. He could circle back to Vons, avoiding the main road. Birds called, but ground life was quiet, the backyard dogs having dehydrated. A car door was left open. Half a lawn and bushes toasted black. He craved water. The more he climbed, the greener it became.

Resting against a pine trunk, breathing it in, he realized he didn't have the walkie.

Pines and hundred-year oaks joined branches over the street in arches. The breeze returned and a sliver of freeway was visible, the 134 to Pasadena, quiet as before the Europeans arrived. Only wafts of putrid odor were recent. He sat down and pictured his family in the broiling house on La Roda. If neighborhoods were empty, the survivors could live where they wanted. The reprieve was so intense, his eyes filled up.

These were his favorite homes, appraised countless times on walks to the park: the endless ranch on the corner lot; the two-story Spanish with a fourteen-foot picture window; the magisterial stone and wood craftsman. He limped up the ranch's porch and knocked on the enormous door. The key under a plant led him to a spacious living room Nicole would have died for.

Breeze from a sliding glass wall in the back drew him to light reflecting off water and he had the sensation that he was back in college, house-sitting. There was a trace of cooking odor.

On the far side of the pool, a woman was twisted awkwardly over a shaded recliner. Her arms dangled, hands resting on Saltillo tile. She wore jeans, a short-sleeved blouse and sunglasses, and didn't appear long dead. He wanted to fall in the pool and quench his thirst. After an eternity, she raised a hand and scratched her neck.

He crossed the threshold, edging to the house-side of the pool. He announced himself and she bolted upright.

"What do you want?"

"I didn't know anyone was alive—I'm a neighbor." He saw bags under her eyes and long, disheveled hair.

"Did you walk here?"

"I was walking to Vons. There was a shooting." He paused and could hear the wind tapping a chlorination buoy against the side of the pool. "I've always admired your house," he said. "And your landscaping." He shifted his weight to his good knee. The bad one throbbed.

The woman swung her feet to the side and leaned forward. She appeared sluggish or possibly hung over. He thought she was going to cry, her voice pained and smoky. "Have you lost anyone?" she said.

He nodded, staring into the clean aquamarine water that separated them.